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A Tale of Two Theaters: Russian Actions in Chechnya in 1994 and 1999

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Between 1994 and 1996, Russia fought a war to prevent its semi-autonomous republic of Chechnya from breaking away. The Chechens theoretically “won” the war. Chechnya was permitted de facto independence, even though Russian President Boris Yeltsin managed to put off a final agreement on Chechnya’s status until the year 2001. However, Russia’s armed forces never admitted defeat, and began planning operations and conducting training to retake Chechnya almost immediately.

Between 1996 and the spring of 1999, events created another opportunity to intervene in Chechnya. These included widespread Chechen hostage-taking, car and cattle theft, and illegal tapping of oil pipelines passing through Chechnya. The Chechen incursion into Dagestan in August 1999, and the suspected Chechen bombing of Russian apartment buildings in the fall of 1999, gave the Russian government the final pretext to conduct the second intervention in Chechnya, in October 1999.

The 1999 intervention was executed according to a well-conceived plan. According to the former Minister of Internal Affairs and Yeltsin loyalist Sergei Stepashin, the plan was prepared for execution in March 1999 but was delayed. The plan differed widely in scope, purpose and strategy from the intervention that took place in December 1994. It appears that Russian officers reread the memoirs of their forefathers who fought Shamil for three decades in the same region for “lessons learned”. They also reread accounts of their abysmal performance in Chechnya in 1995. On 1 October 1999 Russian Prime Minister (now President) Vladimir Putin officially declared war on Chechnya. The Russian military initially sought to establish a *cordon sanitaire* around Chechnya, and then a security zone inside the republic from Chechnya’s northern boundary to the Terek River. Soon, however, the government decided to go after the rebels with a new zeal, and it appears now that the final goal is to seize the entire territory of Chechnya. This strategy took time to develop. What follows is a summary of the key differences between the Chechnya campaigns of 1994 and 1999.

Numerical strength: The numerical strength of the Russian Armed Forces at the start of the 1999 intervention quickly reached 100,000 men. The force was opposed by at least 25,000-30,000 Chechen government troops. The guerrilla forces of rebel leaders Basayev, Khattab and other field commanders add another 20,000-30,000 fighters (*Kommersant*, 29 September 1999). Russia's armed forces needed this numerical advantage, since they planned to cover much more territory than during the 1994 operation.

Limited political control: Russian analyst Dmitrii Trenin noted that, from the outset, Russia's political authorities changed the rules for military activities in the theater. Russian commanders had complete control over the second intervention. The military received a guarantee that "...the former tactics of frequent moratoriums and cease-fires that led to irritation and suspicions of 'treason' among the troops in the previous Chechen War would not be repeated this time." Top political management also allowed the federal military command to make independent decisions concerning the momentum of the offensive and the deadlines of specific missions, e.g., occupation of residential areas, etc."

Extensive planning and the reorganization of the North Caucasus Military District: Another significant difference was the extensive planning and preparation of the Russian force, including its extensive reorganization. The Russian Armed Forces clearly studied what they did wrong the first time, and tried to implement wide-ranging changes. The most important of these changes was the reorganization of the military district to allow combined command of army, MVD and other security forces (*Jane's Defense Weekly*, 8 March 2000).

There most certainly was a definite plan this time, which was sadly lacking in the first war. The Russian government had three initial objectives for the most recent operation: to destroy the rebels and create a security zone in the northern part of Chechnya; to isolate Chechnya economically; and to minimize losses to the advancing Russian force. To accomplish these objectives, Russian strategy focused on bombing Chechen rebel bases, especially those in the south of Chechnya and those near the border with Dagestan. This was meant to demoralize the rebels, and to delay the introduction of ground forces for as long as possible. This was similar to NATO's strategy in Kosovo. Initial strategy and plans were uncertain as to whether territory would be seized and a government installed, or whether the goal would be to neutralize the rebels and support Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov. Eventually, Russia appointed its own Chechen government in exile. The operation was to be conducted in three stages, which have now been completed.

Stage One: The aim of Stage One was to "localize the conflict." This stage had two phases, first the movement up to the Terek River, and then the establishment of new civil administrations in the liberated Chechen districts with the transference of all power to them. Here the strategy was to win the hearts and minds of the Chechen citizenry by converting this part of Chechnya into a model showcase with the availability of decent assets such as health care and schools, and the restoration of law and order. The difficulty of this phase was keeping guerrillas who masqueraded as refugees out of the settlements already cleared.

This stage also had several sub-components: the employment of electronic warfare systems to jam electronic mass media and civilian command and control centers; the creation of strong

points and defensive installations to defend overpasses, roads and other major highways; and the deployment and use of long-range weapons to suppress or destroy the enemy's long-range weapons, reconnaissance systems, and military command and control centers. The long-range weapon of choice was artillery, which was reportedly 2.5-4 times faster in reacting to a crisis than army aviation. Artillery can exploit the element of surprise, be used in all weather, while not putting crews at risk like a helicopter does. Also part of Stage One was the bombing of rebel forces in Dagestan and southern Chechnya.

The desired result of Stage One was the establishment of fire control over the territory occupied by the guerrillas, and the advance and deployment of the main federal forces. Leitmotifs were to keep Russian losses to a minimum and to avoid losses among the peaceful population. Both of the latter goals were decreasingly realized as the conflict wore on. Stage One ended on 15 October 1999, with Russian forces controlling more than one third of Chechnya's territory (from the northern border to the Terek River). During the course of Stage One, Chechen President Maskhadov offered two or three peace plans, but all were rejected outright by Prime Minister Putin.

Stage Two: The goal of Stage Two, which began on 16 October 1999, was to carry out the rout of the "bandit" formations using conventional fire, and to minimize bandit abilities to conduct organized combat operations. Aircraft strikes throughout the republic's entire territory preceded the maneuver of federal troops during the course of the operation's second stage. It also was repeatedly emphasized that using long-range weapons reduced casualties, as did bypassing built-up areas. The establishment of strong-points to control the internal territory of Chechnya, rather than the destruction of enemy formations with troop attacks, was the main goal here. It was planned to carry out the effective engagement and routing of bandit formations with conventional fires from the strong-points. Phase One of Stage Two included the creation of a security zone to the north of the Terek River with a ground operation. It was planned to seal the border with Georgia at this time as well, but this aspect of Phase One did not happen. In Phase Two of Stage Two, new civil administrations in the territory north of the Terek were established.

The clear preference for advancing remained the non-contact method, and only on 21 October did the Russians talk publicly about clearing Grozny. Grozny was actually taken later according to the same methodology described here: the city was blockaded, conventional fire was used as required, and long-range fire of artillery and air power supported troop operations. Every effort was made to keep losses to a minimum during the battle.

Stage Three: This phase began after Grozny and Urus-Martan—suspected to be a center of Islamic extremism (Whahabism) and hostage-trading—were subjected to heavy fire. The objective, according to Deputy Chief of the General Staff Valery Manilov, was to annihilate the bandit units in the foothills and the mountains while restoring a system of governing bodies and improving socio-economic aspects of life. President Boris Yeltsin announced that the operation was now designed to preserve the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation. He added that the operation was also a part of the international community's efforts to fight international terrorism. He stated the goals of the third stage as follows. 1) Political: to rebuild the entire structure of local government and ensure that it functions normally. 2) Economic: to restore the region's economy, to get people working so they can feed their families, and to

provide heat and electricity to their homes. 3) Social: to create the necessary conditions for the return of displaced persons, to open schools and hospitals, and to begin paying pensions and social benefits. President Yeltsin added that the military operation would continue as the situation warrants, in accordance with the objective of eradicating terrorism in the North Caucasus (*Kommersant*, 4 December 2000).

By the time Stage Three began, over half of the republic's territory was liberated. It was reported in the *Military News Bulletin* that on 6 December federal troops went on to the final phase of the operation to free Grozny, which was to take until the end of February. The fighters were ousted from the populated areas of Chechnya to the mountains. It now appears that the armed forces are moving to yet another unannounced stage, whether they want to or not. The *Military News Bulletin* reported that the next stage would be the destruction of illegal armed units in the mountains.

Mission creep, colonial rule: Emil Pain, instructor at Moscow State University and former advisor to President Boris Yeltsin on ethnic affairs, described the almost imperceptible yet escalating change in the goals of the military operation. In August the stated goal was simply to repulse Chechen aggression in Dagestan. In October, the goal had progressed to the creation of a *cordon sanitaire* between Russia and Chechnya along the Terek River. In November the slogan "total elimination of the terrorists" was pronounced. Finally, in January 2000, Acting President Vladimir Putin said that the war was fought for the integrity of Russia, that is, for keeping Chechnya as a part of the Russian Federation. Thus, the same goal as in the first war was eventually adopted, only this time with various stages and phases.

Pain also characterized the wars in Chechnya not as civil wars, but rather as colonial wars. This was because federal authorities treated the Chechens not as citizens but as a group requiring pacification. As proof of this, Pain cited the unwillingness to rely on local Chechen chiefs and the transfer of all power into the hands of Lieutenant General Babichev, the military commandant. In addition, the captured districts were placed in the hands of major generals. Pain believed the abundance of Russian names in positions of both civilian and military power supported his theory of colonial rule, and was evidence that a "violation of the late-colonial canons of the government of the national outlying areas" had been committed (*Obshchaya Gazeta*, 24 February 2000). At the same time, Pain noted, there are fewer and fewer Russians living in the area. So, the area is simultaneously becoming colonized and more homogeneously Chechen.

Winning the information war: Perhaps the most significant change relative to the first war, however, was the preparation of public opinion about the theater of war. During the military operation in 1994, Russia's armed forces lost the "information war" for public opinion. The armed forces refused to grant interviews to the domestic and foreign media, while the Chechens willingly granted interviews. As a result, only the Chechen version of events was available for public consumption, culminating in a public relations fiasco for the Russian military.

In 1999, Russian information strategists successfully turned the tables. Pain indicated that there were several reasons. First, Russian society was tired of failures and thirsted for victories. News of a military victory over the Whahabites in Dagestan quenched this thirst, giving society a

much-needed lift. Second, Russian society was disenchanted with the Chechen revolution. Third, NATO's military operation in Kosovo exerted a strange influence on Russian society, encouraging similar actions within Russia (the logic being, if NATO can bomb civilian targets in a foreign country, why can't Russia?). The degree to which public opinion had shifted was best exemplified by the change in attitude towards the Chechen policy of President Yeltsin. In early 1999 the State Duma demanded the impeachment of President Yeltsin for unleashing the war in Chechnya. Yet in October 1999 Yeltsin was supported by nearly two-thirds of the population when initiating a similar action.

It's not over yet... After the clearing of Grozny the Russian force chased the Chechens into the mountains, and according to Acting President Vladimir Putin routed the rebels. *Kommersant* (26 February 2000) reported that Putin believed the counterterrorist operation in Chechnya was moving into a political phase. The desire was to make the Russian effort centralized and three-tiered. It is unknown if the "interim" arrangement for forming government structures might become permanent. The military has no illusions that this will be an easy process, and is planning to leave significant numbers of soldiers and fortifications in Chechnya. These include 500 strong battalions of internal troops, and the 15,000 man 42nd Motorized Infantry Guards division. Eastern Force Commander Gennady Troshev, deputy commander of the federal group, supported Putin's announcement that the conflict was almost over. Now, according to Troshev, the main objective of the army and the police is to catch the rebel leaders and destroy the small, scattered detachments hiding out in the mountains.

However, these claims that the fighting is over appear to be premature, however. *Izvestia* reported on 4 March that Putin had signed a decree altering the structure of the Security Council apparatus. A seventh administration was created to deal with security problems in the North Caucasus region. On 2 March a Chechen force ambushed Russian OMON forces outside Grozny and killed 37 of the special police. A few days before this attack, the 2nd Battalion of the 104th Paratroop Regiment of the Airborne Assault Forces' Pskov Division lost 86 men. Another MVD OMON unit was later ambushed near the Argun Gorge and lost many men. Thus, the announcement of the end of the fighting and the start of a political process may be nothing more than wishful thinking. Perhaps it was done to solidify Putin's chances of being elected, and this did happen. But the fight for Chechnya, is far from over.

Conclusions: As this short analysis has demonstrated, there were significant ways in which the second intervention differed from the first. These include: 1) The political control over military actions in the theater that supposedly limited military success the first time is gone. Now the military is solely responsible for the results. 2) The military district was totally reorganized for the second conflict. Units that were nearly completely manned were used instead of units cobbled together. 3) Russia won the "information war" from the very first day. 4) There was an extensive plan developed and implemented, whereas in the first operation it did not appear that planning beyond the first month had taken place. 5) This time there is less effort to implement Chechen local rule and more of an attempt to implement "colonial rule."

There are also a few ways in which the second intervention resembled the first. For example, once again the MVD and armed forces tried to work together, but found limited success. The MVD and Army tried to work together at all command levels. In the first war, MVD General

Anatoly Kulikov was made commander of all forces in Chechnya (in late January 1995). In preparation for the 1999 intervention, army commanders were placed in leadership positions within the MVD infrastructure to improve coordination. They were even placed in charge of MVD units, albeit only after reported failures within the MVD command. The latter incidents may represent the desires of Army General Kvashnin to take over the Internal Forces as much as it might reflect MVD incompetence. Undoubtedly, much work remains for the MVD-Army relationship.

Oleg Odnokolenko of *Segodnya* reported Russian plans to develop three zones in Chechnya. His information reportedly comes from the headquarters of the Russian government's plenipotentiary representative in Chechnya, Nikolay Koshman. The first zone would be the territory from the northern border to the Terek River. The plan would be to plow, sow, rebuild housing, and accept refugees. The second zone would be the lowland and foothills of Chechnya, where a tough regime of curfews and limited movement would be imposed. The third zone would be the mountains, which must be blockaded and proclaimed an area of combat operations.

Sergey Markov, the Director of the Political Research Institute, recommended another plan which comprises the following points. First, change the logic of the operation. Make this a fight for the rights of Russia's citizens. Second, conduct an active information policy in western countries. Third, publish a program for a political settlement of the Chechen conflict, or the problem will never be solved. Fourth, demonstrate openness for talks. Demonstrate a desire to solve this problem by peaceful means. Fifth, pay maximum attention to the needs of peaceful citizens and the refugee problem. Finally, recognize that Chechnya is different from other regions of the Russian federation.

There are many options available for the administration to follow. If the political fallout is too great, Putin could make the Army or MVD the scapegoat as Yeltsin did. Already Russia is having trouble with western public opinion and with membership in international organizations. Of course, any coherent policy in Chechnya will take years to implement completely. Yet if nothing is done, Chechnya's consequences will reach far beyond those of the present. Russia, with all its other problems, cannot afford to wait much longer. With all its other problems, Russia cannot afford to wait much longer.